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ABSTRACT

The Basic Skills Task Force within the United States Office of Education was created to provide the effective use of knowledge among the various basic skills programs in the country and to foster increased local impact from Federal education funds. On the assumption that with cooperation and coordination existing programs can meet the basic skills needs of most citizens, this task force defines itself as a social change mechanism with the following goals: to clarify the nature of basic skills and develop a cross-disciplinary focus to solve the problem; to establish and use productive relationships with other public and private programs on the state and local level; to develop and implement effective delivery systems for federal basic skills programs in order to match the resources with the people needing basic skills; and to increase competence in basic skills for all citizens through improved instruction in elementary and secondary schools. (HAI)

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A Plan For Interdisciplinary, Interagency Efforts Toward Literacy

by
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and
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Abstract

The Basic Skills Task Force within the U.S. Office of Education has been initiated to foster increased local impact from Federal education funds. Major emphasis is placed on cooperation and coordination among programs which fund basic skills activities. It is believed that we possess the knowledge to meet the basic skills needs of most citizens. The problem seems to be the need to secure better utilization of available knowledge and resources. Assistance from the research and development community is solicited.

I. Dimensions of the Problem

- American education and the Nation as a whole recognize that many students, former students (drop-outs), and high school graduates do not have adequate mastery of the basic skills. (By basic skills we mean the fundamental competencies that hold the key to successful achievement in the areas of communication and computation (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and arithmetic).

- The educational profession has access to the knowledge and experience to solve most of the basic skills deficiencies. The major problem seems to

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Dr. Schiffman is the director of the National Right to Read Program. Mr. Smith is his assistant for evaluation and planning. This paper is to be presented at the 1978 AERA Annual Meeting in Toronto, Ontario, March 27-31, as a part of the Symposium entitled: Current Issues and Research in Basic Skills Achievement.

be how to get the available knowledge and expertise into the classrooms and therefore improve student performance.

- We would like to see more school systems assess needs and then implement or adopt basic skills programs that are responsible to those needs.

- There are so many agencies and bureaus concerned with basic skills, that any one of them may dissipate much time, energy, and resources attacking problems that another has already overcome.

An Illustration

Federal legislation is initiated when national problems are identified as being widespread, significant and unresolved. A heightened concern for social problems led to the war on poverty during the 1960's. Let's use the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 as an example. This legislation contained a number of discrete titles directed toward the needs of specific target groups. This was the major educational component in the war on poverty.

ESEA has been in effect since 1965, and it is amazing what we haven't learned from this experience. With each program operating independently, and responding to different client groups, there have been few collaborative activities conducted among various programs. Indeed, programs funded by two of these titles could easily exist in the same local district and follow educational philosophies that are diammetrically opposed. Federal legislation could therefore be contributing to confusion and discontinuity at the State and local levels.

The lack of coordination and cooperation does not mean that the various staffs are antagonistic to one another, but it does mean that we lack a use-

ful means of sharing valuable experience data among ourselves. We can either view these developments as sources of anguish or as targets of opportunity. The decision has been made to use these targets of opportunity in the planning of the basic skills task force.

The adoption/adaption of validated programs is an area which various programs can benefit from the experiences of other programs. This is already happening to a degree. The rigor involved in the validation process makes us quite secure when we recommend a validated program as being worthy of replication elsewhere. This rigor means, however, that it will normally be several years before the results of a program are generally available to other school systems. The need for an ongoing information-sharing process that allows faster utilization of the experience of others is quite obvious. The Teacher Corps Research Utilization Cluster has published a useful Guide for developing demonstration programs (Acheson, 1977).

The Right to Read State Leadership and Training Program fosters the development of Standards of Excellence which are state-developed models which describe the characteristics of effective reading programs. The Division of Educational Replication has extensive experience with employing facilitators as educational linking agents. Other equally useful activities could easily be cited. The educational research and development community possesses information that can enhance each of these activities.

We concur with Fairweather (Fairweather, 1977) that "Most human problems cut across disciplines and are not affected by the logic or lack of logic of educational institutions which divides subject matter into various disciplinary areas..."

We perceive the problem of developing effective interdisciplinary and interagency basic skills programs to be one of effective knowledge utilization.

Assumptions

If we expect all students to master basic skills as they progress from grade to grade, State departments of education (SEA's) will have to foster the kind of joint planning and collaboration among local education agencies (LEA's) that leads to the implementation of cooperative schoolwide basic skills programs.

If SEA's and LEA's are expected to utilize Federal funds in a collaborative way, the Federal funding agencies will have to operate the same way. (modeling the desired behavior).

The major unresolved issue is: How do we get Federal, local, and State educational agencies involved in interagency basic skills programs when they have highly categorical legislation, serve different populations, and have not become aware of the need for constructive change?

II. The Basic Skills Task Force

We can view the Basic Skills Task Force (see figure #1) as a social change mechanism which has come into being in order to solve this particular knowledge utilization problem. Key organizational and interpersonal variables need to be considered.

General Statement of Goals

1. To develop conceptual clarity as to the nature of basic skills (expanded, "holistic" conception).

Figure #1

The Basic Skills Task Force

1. Right to Read
2. Follow Through
3. Adult Education
4. Bilingual Education
5. Teacher Corps
6. Career Education
7. Vocational Education
8. Handicapped
9. Educational Replication
10. Equal Educational Opportunity
11. Office of Planning, Budgeting, and Evaluation
12. Indian Education
13. Office of Libraries and Learning Resources
14. Trio (Talent Search, Upward Bound, Special Services for Disadvantaged Students)
15. Title I, ESEA (Division of Education for the Disadvantaged)

Affiliates External to USOE

1. National Center for Educational Statistics
2. National Institute of Education
3. International Reading Association
4. National Council of Teachers of English
5. Parent-Teacher Association (National PTA)
6. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Education
7. National Council of Teachers of Mathematics
8. Council of Chief State School Officers
9. Oakland (California) Public Schools
10. Maryland State Department of Education
11. Florida State Department of Education
12. The President's Commission on Mental Health
13. Pennsylvania State Department of Education
14. Baltimore (Maryland) City Public Schools
15. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
16. Indiana State Department of Eduation
17. U.S. Department of Labor
18. American Speech and Hearing Association
19. American Reading Council
20. Women's Advisory Council
21. Johns Hopkins University
22. Ginn and Company
23. The Michigan State Senate
24. Older Americans Volunteer Programs
25. American Association of Publishers

2. To utilize productive linkages (relationships) with other public and private programs and organizations.

3. To develop and implement effective delivery systems for federal basic skills programs.

4. To increase competence in basic skills for all citizens through improving the delivery of basic skills instruction.

Basic Skills Programs Abound

An April, 1977 survey (Nichelsen, 1977) of federal programs identified 44 federal programs involved with basic skills. There were 35 in the U.S. Office of Education and 38 in all of DHEW.

The total funding for these 44 programs amounted to $3.83 billion. The USOE portions alone amounted to $3.03 billion. If we subtract the total for the massive Title I, ESEA program ($1.72 billion), we still have $1.3 billion or 34.1% of the total for all USOE programs.

At least one clear implication emerges from this data: Any innovation which substantially influences these basic skills programs will have a profound effect on the workings of the U.S. Office of Education. Such is the challenge to the Basic Skills Task Force.

The senior author has been designated as the Chairman of the Basic Skills Task Force by the U.S. Commissioner of Education. Fifteen USOE programs and offices and other agencies concerned with the improvement of basic skills will form a Basic Skills Team and will develop a plan to cooperate in the support of States and local educational agencies in the identification and the development of basic skills programs. In order to obtain input from affected publics, several regional conferences will be conducted.

At least ten successful practices already developed by States and LEA's for implementation of basic skills programs will be published and distributed to all 55 State agencies. The OE team will make specific recommendations in at least the following seven areas: (1) State Leadership, (2) Assessment and Instruction, (3) Teacher Education, (4) Dissemination, (5) Legislation, (6) Private Sector, and (7) Evaluation.

Relevant Research

In an empirical social innovation study, Fairweather et al (Fairweather, et al, 1974) observed that more active approaches such as demonstrations, contributed more to willingness to introduce the innovation than less active ones. They also observed that "It is necessary to locate and help small change-oriented groups within the organization." Similarly, four programs associated with the basic skills team have identified specific tasks within their programs that are concerned with basic skills development. These programs, Adult Education, Title I, Right to Read and Educational Replication, are refining plans of action and milestone dates. Information and results gathered from these projects will be communicated back to the OE Basic Skills Team for analysis and possible dissemination.

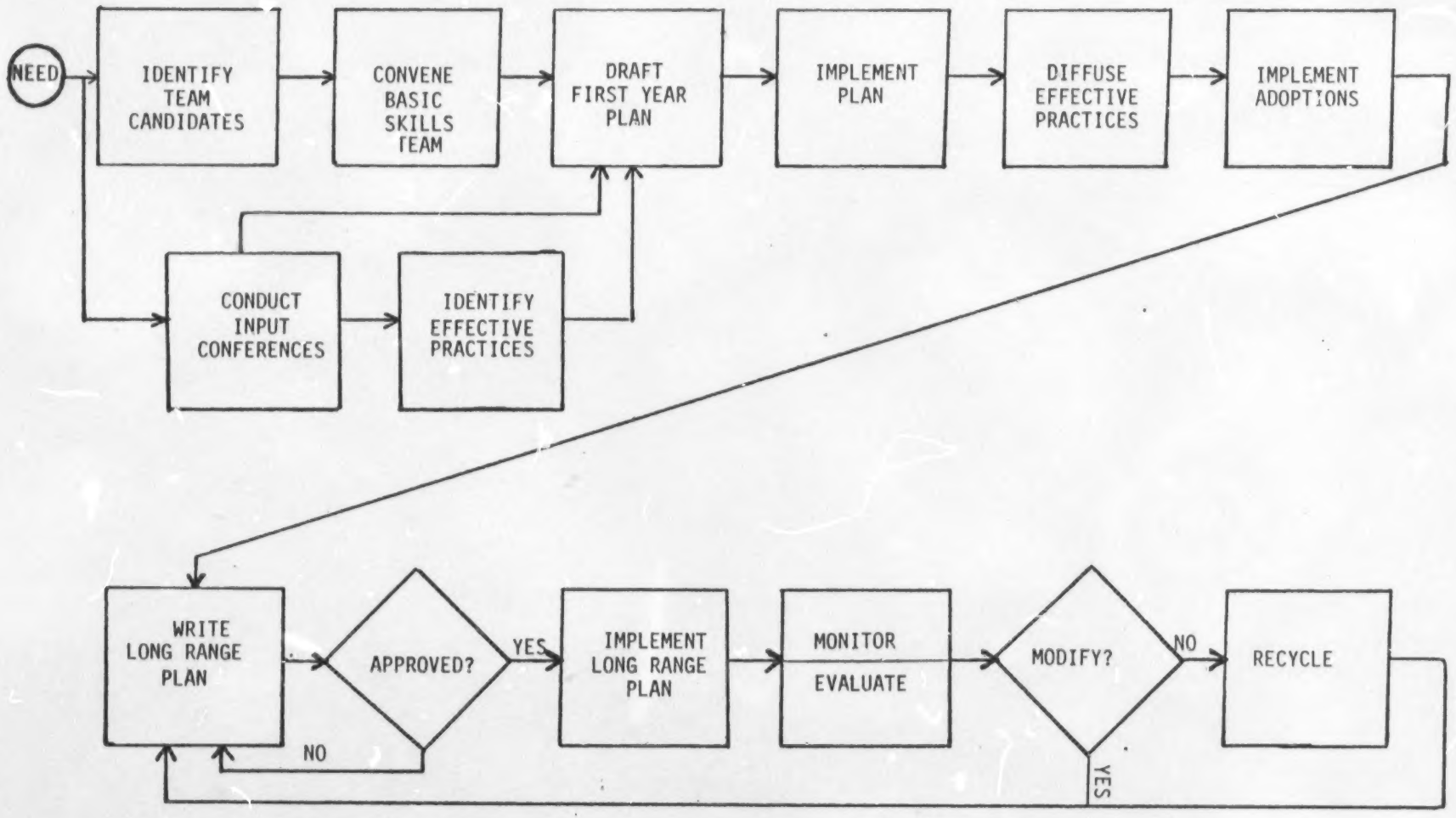
The commitments made by the Basic Skills Task Force to date have been articulated in a flow chart model. This model is shown in figure #2: The Basic Skills Team as a Social Change Mechanism.

The Operating Environment For Basic Skills

One of the major goals of the basic skills initiative is to increase competence in basic skills for all citizens through improving the delivery of basic skills instruction. As a part of this effort Secretary Califano has called for improving the linkages among various programs in the Office of Education which presently provide various forms of assistance in basic skills

Figure #2

THE BASIC SKILLS TEAM AS A SOCIAL CHANGE MECHANISM



instruction to various client groups - children through adults. The obvious intention in fostering such an effort was to realize greater impact by helping States and localities develop and implement more effective and efficient plans for improving basic skills.

In implementing the Secretary's directive, Commissioner Boyer established the Basic Skills Task Force to provide guidance in implementing "new directions" for basic skills in the Office of Education.

There is a distinct possibility that new basic skills legislation will be implemented by 1980. President Carter has also expressed considerable interest in such legislation.

Assistant Secretary for Education, Mary F. Berry, has also expressed a strong interest in improving basic skills instruction through improved delivery systems. In a speech delivered to a Right to Read training seminar for reading program directors, (November 3, 1977) she proclaimed that

"... We don't suffer from a lack of good teaching approaches. You read the same studies that I do, and you recognize that, for the vast majority of people who haven't reached an acceptable literacy level, the curriculum packages exist that can remedy the problem.

No, the difficulty doesn't result from a shortage of will or resources. It stems in large part from the simple and unpleasant fact that we have not done a good job of matching the resources to the needs. There has been too much overlap and contradiction, both among federal programs and among those with which you're involved at the state and local levels."

In a speech before the College Entrance Examination Board Annual Meeting (October 24, 1977) Secretary Califano shared his perception of the public

interest in basic skills: "There is an insistent message for all of us in this intense concern about American education: The American people--in return for the billions of tax dollars they spend on education; in return for the great hope they invest in their children's future--are demanding that a basic level of competence, a set of minimum skills, be transmitted by our elementary and secondary schools to their students."

Califano further stated that "In the past three years, the number of Americans rating their public schools as good or excellent has fallen almost 25 percent. And this year, 83 percent of persons polled favored a return to basics - a return to the three R's, taught in more orderly classrooms.

The Secretary also showed his sensitivity to the dangers inherent in the clamoring for a return to the basics. In the same speech he said "Not all skills are basic skills; in focusing on minimal competency, we cannot let the minimum become the maximum. We must ensure that students of ability are given the chance to develop to the fullest, and that important subjects beyond the three R's are not overlooked."

Space does not permit an exploration of issues such as making maximums of minimums or setting standards so that most everyone can pass. These issues are, however, very powerful in our operating environment. Christopher Jencks wrote a biting article on basic skills that appeared in the Washington Post on February 19, 1978. Several short quotes from that article are inserted here in order to highlight some aspects of the controversy:

"In Washington, proposals have been advanced to create new national education standards and otherwise involve the federal government more deeply in local classrooms."

- "The trouble is at the secondary school level - and again not with the basics."
- "But contrary to popular impressions, SAT scores are not very useful in judging whether high schools are doing their job."
- "The NEA is busy complaining about complex language and obscure vocabulary and trying to prove that everything is really fine."
- "The 'back-to-basics' movement seems mainly concerned with restoring respect for persons in authority, like parents and teachers, and not for ideas... Indeed the drill work of the back-to-basics movement seems to be a prescription for discouraging interest in complex ideas."
- "One popular explanation for declining test scores is that desegregation forced many previously all-white schools to lower their academic standards to accommodate non-white students with fewer academic skills... Both Iowa and Minnesota are more than 98 percent white, for example, yet they report marked declines in high school scores. The trouble cannot be blamed on blacks."

III. Guiding Change

We have approached our tasks as program administrators. We do recognize, however, that in order to make the best use of research findings, we will have to engage ourselves in a social change process. The Basic Skills Task Force is the mechanism that has been designated to bring about the intended change(s). As we look beyond our short-term activities and toward a long range plan, we recognize the need for practical guidance. What are key

variables that we must consider while developing a long range basic skills plan for the agency? What are the key requirements for success? What constraints must be overcome?

Fairweather (Fairweather, 1977) has proposed a useful list of required elements of a social change mechanism. We have tentatively adopted his proposed elements as a planning checklist. Fairweather's eight elements have been converted into criterion statements as follows:

1. There is an active role played by social scientists

   Comment: We strongly urge and need social scientists to show us how their research can be applied to this social change/research utilization problem.

2. The mechanism (task force) is innovative

   Comment: We recognize the need to free ourselves from traditional bureaucratic norms such as the guarding of turf and reinventing the wheel.

3. There is democratic participation

   Comment: We understand the need to utilize persuasion as a means toward initiating constructive action in the form of a long range plan.

4. The mechanism is built on a strong humanitarian base (value system)

   Comment: We must ensure that our actions lead to results which have positive effects on humans and at the same time avoid negative effects.

5. The products of the task force will be scientifically evaluated

6. Problem-oriented research is used

   Comment: A cross-disciplinary focus is needed--no single discipline can solve the basic skills problem.

7. The solutions which have been adopted are constantly being monitored

8. The solutions that have been adopted are useful

Comment: Our constituents must be able to use the solutions we propose.

The comments are ours.

We also note with great interest Fairweather's claim that "The social change mechanism that has been more influential in creating change throughout the centuries in most societies has been this two-fold process: The innovation of a new program-social reform, technological device, or the like--and its diffusion throughout the society by interested change agents."

Management Support

We hope that the Right to Read Grants Management Information System which will be operative later this year, will become an effective management tool that can also be used for managing future basic skills projects.

Data collected on both applications and performance and financial reports will be structured for automated recording and processing. This will allow federal program managers to analyze the reported data more easily, efficiently and accurately.

This design is unique among federal reporting systems in that it is based on general reports which require grant recipients to only report changes to what had previously been reported.

There are other information gathering and sharing processes that could complement this system. One system that we will examine for possible inclusion is the Information Support System developed by the National Drug Education Program in the U.S. Office of Education. This system provides ongoing

data on project growth and development and documents project strategies that are considered successful.

The same principles guide the reporting system utilized by the Research and Development Utilization Program at the National Institute of Education.

Short-Term Activities: Accountability

Secretary Califano is utilizing a management process called M.I.T.S. to track basic skills initiatives which will produce some tangible results by March of 1979. The Management Information Tracking System is based on Management-by-Objectives concepts. The system involves measurable objectives which the Secretary tracks through quarterly reports.

Major portions of the short-term (MITS) objectives are related to the adoption/adaption of validated basic skills programs.

The first quarterly report is due on March 31, 1978.

Long Term Prospects

The Basic Skills Task Force held it's first meeting in January, 1978. In the next several months the group will be implementing the short-term activities and planning for the more distant future.

We are in the process of scheduling a series of meetings with private citizens and groups to tap their knowledge, experience, and observations. There are many facets of educational programming that must be considered as well as other considerations like knowledge utilization, organizational development and evaluation research.

There will be a long-term plan that must consider the proper utilization of available knowledge and resources in future legislation and the federal administration of that legislation. The assumptions guiding the basic skills

task force clearly suggest the need for different approaches to federal legislation and the administration of the legislation. Primary among these is the need for collective action based on more efficient use of available knowledge and resources. What are the characteristics of the delivery systems which are necessary for effective and efficient basic skills programming?

Colleagues who have an interest in helping us address this and other related questions are strongly urged to contact either of the authors. Some may have conducted or are aware of research that we can use. Many of you can make valuable contributions to the basic skills conferences. Any available publications are needed right away. In either case, please contact us at:

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